

Routine health care

The bond between a pet and its owner is very strong and provides huge rewards. Along with the rewards comes the responsibility of caring for a living creature that depends upon you for all its needs. Caring for your pets needs means providing a good diet and regular exercise. A preventative healthcare programme for your pet should include worming and vaccination.

Register your pet with your local vet even if it is perfectly healthy, you will know where to go in an emergency and your vet will be able to give you advice on routine health care.

The key to recognising illness in your pet is to know what your pet is like when it is well. Often an owner will be able to detect subtle changes in their pet's behaviour or appetite that indicate illness well before anyone else can. Your partner in caring for your pet should be your veterinary surgeon. Regular visits to a vet for routine health checks and preventative health care such as vaccination allow you and your pet to build a relationship with your vet. Early detection of clinical diseases will allow your vet to give more effective treatments. Most pets live with us as part of the family - maintaining their health also means there is less risk of them passing on disease. The chance of you catching a disease from an animal is small but there are some diseases that people can get from animals (zoonoses). A healthy pet is unlikely to pass on disease.

Signs of good health

- Bright eyes, clean ears, eyes and nose
- Interest in its surroundings
- Constant stable weight
- Consistent appetite and water consumption
- The coat should be shiny, soft and free of parasites

Keeping your pet in good health

- Feed a healthy, complete diet
- Have regular exercise.
- Mental stimulation in the form of an interesting environment and opportunities to play are also important.
- A regular walk is good for dogs because it provides exercise as well as mental stimulation.
- Many cats are allowed to range outdoors and so entertain themselves - if you do not let your cat out consider whether the home environment offers it enough stimulation and opportunities to play.
- Coat condition can be affected by diet. Fish oils or evening primrose oil capsules may help improve a dry coat. Groom your pet every day with a soft brush.

Exercise

Regular exercise is important to keep all animals healthy. Most cats are good at regulating their exercise and match their food intake to their energy needs; dogs are less good at this.

If your pet is showing signs of stiffness when they get up from rest they may be getting arthritis. If so the exercise programme should be altered accordingly. Regular short walks will allow your pet to maintain mobility better if they are arthritic. If your pet is overweight then a diet may help improve its condition and allow it to exercise better.

A healthy diet

Must contain all the nutrients your pet requires.

Dietary requirements change with age and may also be affected if your pet is suffering from some diseases.

Overweight animals have a higher risk of diseases such as arthritis, heart disease and diabetes. Check your pet's weight every 6 months to make sure it is not overweight and prevent excessive weight gain by cutting back on calories if your pet's weight increases.

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Worming

All pets have worms at some stage in their life and many will be re-infected unless they are given regular, routine worming treatment. Except in rare cases, worms are unlikely to cause serious harm. Getting rid of worms is relatively simple and inexpensive so regular treatment with a wormer is strongly recommended, particularly as some types of worm can be passed onto humans. Make sure your pet is wormed every three months against roundworms and tapeworms. Some worms are transmitted by fleas so routine flea control all year round is important.

Flea control

Fleas are the most common parasite in dogs and cats - almost every pet is likely to be infected at some stage in its life. However, modern flea control products mean that it is possible to prevent fleas from becoming a problem in your household. Working closely with your vet, who will give you advice on how to use these products effectively, you will be able to stop these nasty little insects making a meal of your pet and you!

Neutering

It is a sad truth that the number of puppies and kittens born every year is far greater than the number of good homes that can be found for them. As a result, thousands of healthy animals are destroyed and many unwanted animals are left to fend for themselves. Having your pet neutered will not only help to reduce these numbers, it is also one of the simplest, safest and most practical ways of safeguarding your pet's health and welfare.

Vaccinations

There are a number of highly infectious and potentially fatal diseases that can affect our pets. There is no treatment for many of these diseases and young animals who catch them often die. However, for many of these conditions there is a simple protection in the form of vaccination. Ensuring that your pet completes an initial course of vaccinations and then receives regular booster jabs is important if you want them to stay fit and healthy.

Dental care

Dental disease is very common in cats and some dogs. Surveys show that after the age of three years, about seven out of ten cats have some kind of tooth disorders. If left unattended these may cause irreversible damage to the animal's teeth, gums and jaw bones. Dental disease can be prevented by stopping the build up of plaque on the teeth.

Signs of Illness

- A fever - they are likely to be quieter than normal and probably will be off their food.
- Any changes in your pet's behaviour, altered appetite or water consumption, or the presence of signs such as coughing or diarrhoea should alert you to the fact that there may be a problem with your pet.
- Most animals recover from illness in 24-48 hours - if your pet does not seem to be improving in this time or is getting worse then you should contact your vet.
- Most owners can tell if their pet is limping or crying with pain, but it can be harder to see if your pet is suffering from a long-term discomfort such as arthritis. Dogs and cats generally show a change in behaviour or temperament when they're uncomfortable. A normally happy and affectionate pet may become grumpy and avoid human contact, preferring to sit or lie quietly by itself. If the animal can reach the painful area, they may lick, scratch, or bite at it.